When is Going with The Grain Making the Problem Worse?

In order to realise change, development practitioners sometimes make compromises with groups that do not always share the same ideals. Following a recent workshop on social accountability, Tom Kirk and Annette JE Fisher reflect on the discussions held and ask when, and how, 'going with the grain' can make a problem worse.

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"What are the limits to the emerging orthodoxy of 'going with the grain', particularly in fragile and conflict-affected environments where the state may not be the primary authority? When, if at all, should development programmes work with those that have a dark side, that perpetuate patronage politics, exclude certain groups, suppress opponents, or worse?"

This was a subtext of one of the discussions during two days of workshops with researchers, practitioners and donors interested in the idea of social accountability. The sessions were under Chatham House Rules, so we can't attribute the juiciest nuggets to individuals or programmes.

Going with the grain acknowledges that developmental change, whether within institutions, state-society relationships or social norms, will often require those advocating for it to make moral and material compromises. Indeed, the days of 'development' being understood as something done *by* developers *to* those to be 'developed' are, thankfully, mostly over. Instead, it is now widely recognised that politically astute programmes involve working with reform-minded powerholders, political parties and social movements that are already getting things done or poised to do so. However, compromises will often have to be made when those working together do not exactly share all their ideals.

Brian Levy's 2014 book, *[Working with the Grain: Integrating Government and Growth](#)*, discussed this approach within institutional reform programmes. He argued that going with the grain is about incrementalism, with desired reforms hopefully occurring in lock-step with economic growth. Yet, he warned that efforts to do one faster than the other, by clamping down on handing out of states jobs as patronage for example, can cause elites to respond by finding other, less transparent or more harmful ways to ensure they can reward their allies.

The compromise for programmes then, Levy argues, is to tacitly accept a certain amount of cronyism in top governmental jobs for as long as it takes to change the mindsets of, or build other opportunities for, the powerholders blocking further reforms. Compromises may also mean working on things that powerholders deem a priority and which may directly benefit them, either financially or in other ways, in order to create space for more desirable changes later. However, both of these become particularly difficult when donors can see how their funds enable bad practices or abuses of power to continue.

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Compromises must also be made in programmes that work closer to the ground, within wider society. For example, social accountability programmes that aim to mobilise and support citizens to demand better services often find that they need to include those that are politically connected to get things done. In much of Africa and South Asia, this may include the informal brokers, 'big men', 'political fixers' or 'social workers' that have the ears of politicians in charge of state services. It is well known that such intermediaries sell communities' votes in return for being that link. This risks programmes strengthening or entrenching undesirable modes of politics to ensure access.

In the case of programmes aimed at changing social norms, it is increasingly common to work with local authorities to help spread new messages or challenge prevalent attitudes. For the champions of such approaches, networks of community elders or religious leaders are often seen as locally legitimate change agents, able to reach those that will not usually attend workshops or listen to radio talk shows. For others, however, development programmes that work with them tacitly endorse their other dubious practices, which in the places conference attendees worked included child marriage and the seclusion of women.

Striking examples discussed at the workshop also included the less spoken about and somehow darker side of going with the grain in highly insecure environments. For example, programmes might have to compromise on where they work, share information and data with local security agencies, or potentially give money or resources to an armed group to ensure protection in a given geography. These are all very real, every-day, grain-related decisions which programme staff grapple with.

Attendees at the workshop both agreed and disagreed over what all this means. It was generally accepted that working with the grain is about getting a seat at the table, gaining access, and allowing outsiders and the insiders they ally with to begin conversations with powerholders or communities. For some, this extends as far as 'buying' a seat at the table. Indeed, it was argued that this is what some aid agencies are effectively doing when they make unconditional (and conditional) transfers to state institutions. Yet, there was also a palpable unease about such practices.

Turning to *when* compromises are justified, many attendees initially replied with the familiar refrain that programmes should 'do no harm'. However, it was pointed out that all of the aforementioned compromises entail being comfortable with 'doing some harm' to someone. This led to debates about what constitutes acceptable harm and when do programmes bear responsibility for unacceptable harm? And how can we know who is being harmed?

For instance, when do programmes become responsible for aid transfers used to feather patronage networks and how do they weigh up whether that harm is worth the opportunities it gains reformers to have conversations with powerholders? Or how do programmes begin to measure and quantify the moral authority illiberal religious leaders may derive from being associated with them and to weigh this against the ability to communicate their messages to difficult-to-reach audiences?

Unsurprisingly, there are no easy answers to these conundrums. Moreover, those that were offered were heavily contingent. For example, many argued that decisions to compromise are made upon the identities of those implementing programmes, the latest fads within funding agencies or their domestic political environments, and the chance to seize once in a generation windows of opportunity. All were argued to be part of the day-by-day, context-specific calculations that feed into programmes' decisions to 'go with the grain'.

Inevitably, it was not long before someone raised the issue of whose grain or grains should programmes go with anyway? Many suggested that only through ongoing consultations and participatory methods can those managing programmes know when their compromises are overlooking marginalised communities or would clearly be considered by them to be a step too far. This requires listening to local programme staff with their ear to the ground and a large measure of what some termed 'political smarts'. They were widely considered the lynchpins of efforts to go with the grain in fast-changing fragile, conflict and violence affected contexts, and they were said to usually be the root of successful programmes.

Nonetheless, there was also an objection to the entire enterprise of going with the grain. It centred around the argument that those funding development programmes would not make the same sorts of compromises in their own countries, so why do so in those they work in? Put another way, doesn't this emerging orthodoxy just take us back to the old days of one rule for the developers and another for those supposedly to be developed?

Where does this diversity of opinion and experience leave us? On the one hand, it is unlikely that development practitioners will ever be able to successfully systematise or teach going with the grain (sorry Brian). Rather, it is clearly a context-, personality- and opportunity-dependent practice, that requires careful, constant monitoring, consultation, and programme adjustments, with the interests of those affected by programming driving decisions to compromise where possible. On the other, it is perhaps another reason why programmes should try to be more like social movements, with politically smart locals in the lead and buy-in from broad swathes of the population sought. Is this possible? The jury's still out. Nonetheless there are number of ongoing programmes that will be providing us with evidence on some of the issues covered above over the next few years.

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